Mothers and Mammismo in the Italian Diaspora

Willson, Perry; Morris, Penelope; Giorgi, Adalgisa ; Ricatti, Francesco; Barocci, Silvia; Maria Susanna, Garroni

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Forum: Mothers and *Mammismo* in the Italian Diaspora

Introduction

The following short pieces were all originally presented as papers at a workshop held in Edinburgh (Scotland, UK) in May 2014. The workshop formed part of a wider interdisciplinary project, «La Mamma: Interrogating a National Stereotype» funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, to investigate the role and representations of Italian mothers, and, in particular, the stereotype of *mammismo*. Whilst the three other workshops in the series (held in Dundee, Glasgow and Rome) focused on discourse about mothers in Italy itself (both past and present), the Edinburgh meeting (The Stereotype Abroad: *Mammismo* in the Italian Diaspora) looked beyond Italy to migrant communities in North America, Australia and New Zealand. The academic workshop was followed by a public event, held in a local theatre, based on Italian-Scottish experiences.

The idea of the *mamma italiana* is arguably one of the most widespread and recognisable stereotypes in perceptions of Italian national identity both in and beyond Italy. As historian Anna Bravo has suggested, the *mamma* has become a «glorious archetype», and the enduringly popular image of the Italian mother is of a strong woman who dotes on her son and dedicates herself to him intensively. In exchange she gets the right to veto his choices, his constant attentions and an unrivalled emotional and symbolic dependency. (Bravo, 2001, p. 78)

This figure and the effects of *mammismo*, which make frequent appearances in jokes and other forms of popular culture, have been seen by some politicians and social commentators as profoundly influential in Italian society, and they have been the subject of considerable debate and anxiety. *Mammismo* has been seen as a contributing factor to many of what are perceived as current «problems» with the Italian family including the advanced age at which many Italian «children» – the so-called «*bamboccioni*» – leave home, the extremely

unequal gender division of labour within Italian households and even Italy's dramatically low birth rate. The stereotype of *mammismo* also shapes ideas about how «Italian national character» is viewed from abroad.

Historian Marina D'Amelia (D'Amelia, 2005) has argued that the notion that there is, and has been since time immemorial, a particularly strong relationship between Italian mothers and their sons is, in fact, far from the universal, timeless feature of Italian society that many assume it to be. Instead, she argues, it is an example of an «invented tradition», one that emerged in the immediate post-war period when certain writers such as Corrado Alvaro, who, according to D'Amelia, first coined the term *mammismo*, were looking for reasons to explain Italy's social ills. Poor mothering, they asserted, was the root cause of many of the shortcomings of Italian men and therefore of Italian society. Women, in short, were to blame for what men did badly. But even if, as D'Amelia argues, this negative stereotype was born in Italy, in a very specific historical context, it cannot be denied that cultural representations of women's roles in Italian diaspora communities, particularly American films and television programmes, have played a role in disseminating and popularising such ideas. A workshop on perceptions of the role of Italian mothers and of the stereotype itself beyond Italy's borders was therefore essential to our project. As the various contributors to our workshop demonstrated, of course, the realities for many Italian diaspora mothers were very different from such simplistic, stereotypical ideas. For such communities the relationship between migration and motherhood was multi-layered and often of deep significance.

The public event in Edinburgh, entitled *Maw or Mamma: Mothers and Motherhood in the Italian Scottish Community*, combined personal testimonies, a photographic display, and a theatrical performance. It engendered a very lively debate that pointed to a notable depth of feeling about mothers and motherhood amongst Italian Scots and raised some very interesting points of discussion and areas of complexity, particularly around questions of the differential treatment of sons and daughters, the place of the mother in the hierarchy of the family and, most particularly, contrasting attitudes towards the stereotypical view of Italian motherhood between early and recent migrants to Scotland. The Italian-Scottish part of the project is very much in its infancy, but it clearly resonated with the papers presented earlier in the day in the academic workshop and on which the papers that follow are based.

Two of the short pieces included here focus on representations of migrant women in North America. Maria Susanna Garroni's paper offers a broad sweep, examining the changing role of women and the changing portrayal of mothers and mother-child relations in the American-Italian community over the course of the hundred years following the first wave of migration at the end of the nineteenth century. As she demonstrates, the very idea of *mammismo* was absent

in the early part of the period she examines, emerging only (along with a not dissimilar American equivalent) in the later years. Silvia Barocci looks at a much more specific example, an analysis of the representation of mothers in Tina De Rosa's *Paper Fish*, an experimental novel about family life in the Italian diaspora community in America of the 1950s. Barocci focuses in particular on De Rosa's portrait of Doria, the first-generation migrant grandmother, who is depicted not as an overbearing *mamma* figure but as an asset to her family, a «wise and benevolent matriarch».

Our other two papers take us to the Antipodes. Adalgisa Giorgio's contribution, based on an analysis of fifty oral testimonies collected from women living in the Island Bay suburb of Wellington, examines attitudes to motherhood, and approaches to mothering, among Italian diaspora women living in late twentieth and in twenty-first century New Zealand. Giorgio argues that, although the Italian family structure still seems to inform the values and practices of this community, mother-son relationships do not override other family bonds. Francesco Ricatti instead focuses on the Italian community in Australia in the early post-war years. In his paper he looks both at the experience of migrant mothers as well as at the contrasts between public discourses extolling an idealised maternity and the more complex and often difficult realities which emerge from sources such as written memoirs and oral testimonies. His paper also explores the emotive and symbolic role of mothers left behind in Italy for those who had migrated.

For further information about the *La Mamma: Interrogating a National Stereotype project*, see the project website at http://lamammaitaliana.wordpress.com/.

Penelope Morris and Perry Willson
University of Glasgow and University of Dundee

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The «*Mammissima*», the «Mom»: What's in a Word?

What is generally understood in the United States by the term «*mammismo*»? Writing about Frank Sinatra's mother, Gennari describes a «*mammissima*» (as explained by a cousin in Italy) as «a big-hearted woman who always has bread and jam for all» (Gennari, 2001, p. 8). But Italian-American mothers are also seen as over-protective, especially of their sons, whom they spoil and allow to behave in ways that challenge socio-legal norms and the work ethic. In short, the «*mammissima*» is blamed for raising problem men (Messina, 2000, pp. 687-693).

Women who emigrated from the Italian peninsula during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came from a society based, at least apparently, on a patriarchal hierarchy (Egelman, 2000). Yet, when Italian women first arrived in the United States, they found a situation markedly different from the mother country, where their work and expertise had been little valued. Once in the United States, Italian women, whilst not abandoning traditional roles, often had to turn to full time employment, while their menfolk, instead, were often visibly unemployed. Even when children worked, they felt their mothers provided food, love, warmth and shelter whereas fathers spent little time with them. Employment increased their interactions with the host society. Green has argued– without romanticizing the situation – that employment gave Italian immigrant women strength and confidence, and, at least unofficially, improved their status in the family hierarchy (Green, 1996). Despite this, Italian mothers who immigrated from the 1880's to the 1900's were often perceived as poor housewives, dirty women who scavenged food from dustbins. The English-language press in the United States tended to depict them as oppressed by Italian men who were work-shy and «abusive and negligent in their role as providers» (Guglielmo, 2010, 96). There was no discussion of «*mammismo*» in this early, harsh period. However, the role of Italian mothers in preserving traditional family values was evident even if not necessarily appreciated. The host society may have looked down on them as *dagos*, but in the private sphere they strengthened their position.

By the first decades of the twentieth century, Italian-American women had carved out a significant economic niche and played a central role in the formation of ethnic communities. By working in small shops, taking in lodgers, doing laundry and midwifery, they forged social networks that created the ethnic atmosphere and structures of neighborhoods. They became aware of opportunities offered by the new society and it was women who were the most inclined to push and save for buying a home, and to support their children's education. They were least inclined to repatriate (Garroni, forthcoming). The image of a strong mother who can hold her own emerged in this period (Logan Siniscalco, 2014; Saccomando Coppola, 2014). In the Italian-American press,

success stories of Italian-American ladies and misses – teachers, nurses, social workers – in tune with the American model yet respectful of Italian traditions often appeared, in an attempt to fend off criticism of backwardness and to show degrees of «Americanization» (Vecchio, 2006).

In the early twentieth century, American culture itself was reinforcing and redesigning the «mother» role. Between 1900 and 1920, growing concern about infant mortality in Canada, Britain, and the United States gave rise to educational campaigns to teach women how to be «proper mothers» (Arnup and Dodd, 1990). In the 1920s and 1930s, therefore, being a good American woman also meant being a good mother. Italian-American women responded by trying to fulfill this role. The two cultures came to complement one another: a well respected Italian-American mother had to be both the welcoming, supporting, good-cooking mother of «the Italian tradition» (the *mammissima*) as well as someone who cared for and supported the social and civic roles of her children, in the American model of citizens and achievers. Mothers were becoming «moms» for third generation Italian immigrants and they increasingly looked like American mothers. Meanwhile, typical emotional Mediterranean warmth and language traditions were preserved by the *nonne*, some still in black headscarves, mostly speaking only dialect and little if any English (Saccomando Coppola, 2014). In this same period, Italian men, were not, on the whole, trusted – as workers, politicians or entrepreneurs – since they were seen as morally weakened by, among other faults, their «excessive maternal attachment» (Sanfilippo, 2011, pp. 69-74; Messina, 2000, p. 692).

Later, Italian-American women, and the Italian-American ethnic group as a whole, following the wider acceptance they had attained politically and economically during the New Deal and the «fabulous Fifties», would achieve a higher status. After the war years, on the one hand, Italian-American *mammismo* acquired a more visible position in American stereotyping, and on the other an Anglo-Saxon equivalent (a «momism») appeared, notably in Philip Wylie's book *The Generation of Vipers* (1942). Here a virago mother violates the privacy of her son, somehow seduces him, makes him suppress his real feelings, and is ready to damage both their lives to serve her own purposes. This type of mother emasculates her sons and makes them dependent whilst also disempowering her husband, the father (Darby, 1987, p. 87). In the end, both stereotypes have a twofold purpose: the American «momism» scapegoats mothers for the failures of the individualistic, consumer-oriented society that developed after WWII, while somehow excusing men's responsibility for social problems; the Italian-American stereotype of the «*mammissima*» keeps Italian-American women within the framework of traditional social norms while highlighting the dangers of the weak yet aggressive masculinity of fourth or fifth generation

Italian-American men competing in the job market. Mothers, whether wasps or from ethnic minorities, found themselves blamed for society's ills.

Some studies published in the 1960s and 1970s did, however, argue that Italian immigrant mothers were different from American mothers. Among Italian-Americans, they argued, the exaltation of the mother in her role as nurturer and carer, to the detriment of her needs, led to lifelong loyalty and devotion from her children. The «notable» warmth and protectiveness she bestowed on her offspring made them over-dependent, delayed their psychological independence and diminished their ambitions compared to non-Italian-Americans (Johnson, 1978, p. 240). Even in the 1980s, according to Cohen, Italian-American mothers were more traditional than, for example, Jewish mothers. They had higher fertility rates, felt that «a women's place is in the home» and treated sons and daughters differently, the former getting preferential treatment (Egelman, 193; Cohen, 1980).

But how much of this, if true, is caused by *mammismo* is still a matter of contention. As Gardaphé recently affirmed, «Perhaps there is nothing more misunderstood than the Italian American mother» (Gardaphé, 2013). Maybe it is time to begin unravelling this misunderstanding.

Maria Susanna Garroni
Università degli Studi di Napoli l'Orientale

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Spooning the Tomato Sauce over a Dish of Pasta: Portraits of a Mom in Tina De Rosa's *Paper Fish*

Tina De Rosa's *Paper Fish* (1980) is a magnificent novel about family relationships in which women educate women, uncovering ancient stories and hidden memories. It offers interesting insights into the role of Italian-American

women in the Fifties. In this paper I will discuss how the protagonist of the novel, Grandma Doria, goes far beyond the stereotype of the Italian over-protective *mamma*.

Let's start from the stereotype. Let's start from *mammismo*. Let's start from the novel:

> «She no take care my grandchildren», Sarah heard Doria say in the other room. «She no take care my son». Doria touched Marco's face. «Look, how skinny. I can see you bones. […] Why you no take more care? […]. You the wife. Why you no take care?? […]». (De Rosa, 2003, p. 38)

This seems to be a genuine example of «*mammismo*», in which a desperate mother-in-law, Grandma Doria, accuses her daughter-in-law of being neglectful and careless about her duties as a mother and a wife. If we go on reading, however, a much more complex picture emerges:

> «Forgive me», Doria said. «Forgive me. I hurt you. I say things I no should say. I swear on Grandpa Dominic's grave, my heart is sorry. May God strike me dead if I lie». […] «Sarah?» Doria called. «Sarah, come back? Where is Sarah? I ask her forgiveness». (p. 39)

Asking for forgiveness, Grandma Doria immediately repents of her «mammist» words: in many other passages of the novel she says she loves her daughter-in-law Sarah and that she is a good wife, as a typical over-protective Italian *mamma* would not. If «*mammismo*» is the encoded stereotype then, Grandma Doria, who seems to have all the characteristics of a stereotypical *mamma*, goes far beyond it. To explore this, I will briefly consider the way De Rosa portrays Grandma Doria and her world.

Let's start with Doria herself who, at first sight, seems to be a typical Italian mother. She is an uneducated superstitious woman from the South (of Italy), who was born into a poor peasant family and decided to emigrate to the New World in search of a better life.[1] She is «large, larger than any other woman Sarah had ever seen; her hands were fat and firm; she swept them through the air in large circles» (p. 50). We are also told that her hair is black, even if she is blue-eyed and thence slightly different from the majority of Italian women. Throughout the novel, however, Doria is portrayed as the «wise and benevolent matriarch» to whom, as critic Edvige Giunta suggests, «everyone turns for guidance and comfort» (Giunta 2003, p. 125). She has a male counterpart in Dominic, her late husband, who, as his name suggests, was the *dominus*, the master of the family. He is a loving and caring husband, but too much part of that old world of first-generation immigrants who struggled to find their place

in the new one. Although he «never learned English» (p. 43), he asserts his right to make plans both for her (Doria) and for *his* children. But Dominic, the *dominus*, the «patriarch», in fact, appears little in the novel.

Paper Fish may be read as the story of a journey towards self-acceptance, or better as the quest of Carmolina – Doria's granddaughter – for her identity,[2] an identity which is neither entirely Italian, nor entirely American but something more and different, that is both Italian *and* American. Moreover, Carmolina is a woman and she has to find her own place in the new culture which both accommodates her ethnic identity as well as her new role as an independent woman. Doria is pivotal in this process. Dominic's refusal to learn English and to engage with American culture is a legacy that cannot be passed to Carmolina. When he makes plans both for Grandma Doria and for those children which are his and not theirs, he is doing it in that «patriarchal» way, old Italian style, that leaves women no place apart from the kitchen and no other family role beyond the maternal. But Grandma Doria is quite different: succeeding in learning English after a fashion, she seems to be the only one able to help Carmolina find her place in the (new) world.[3]

Let's go back to Grandma Doria and look at the places she is linked to. We often meet her in the kitchen, which is a woman's place throughout the novel and in which she reigns as a queen and is adored as a divinity in the temple. Just like a temple Doria's kitchen has many different altars, effigies and small statues of the Virgin Mary (twenty three, according to Carmolina who has counted them). And just like a temple Doria's kitchen is a place for sacred actions: it is here, for example, that Carmolina washes her grandmother's feet, re-enacting that famous «washing of the feet» in Saint John's Gospel, a purifying rite performed by Jesus for the Disciples during the Last Supper as a sign of his redemptive love. But what is the purpose of this love and purification? The novel is quite unclear but my interpretation is that, following the gospel, it is the «saviour» who performs the rite: Jesus for his Disciples and Carmolina for her grandmother. Soon after this passage, there is an important scene in which Carmolina runs away to the bathroom to vomit and Grandma Doria remembers her own mother keeping olive oil in a wooden cask and pouring it with a wooden spoon. These scenes symbolise resistance to the purification rite and a reference to Christening (which is celebrated using oil, even if in *Paper Fish* this has to be taken less for its religious meaning but more as a ceremony which marks the entrance into a community). In other words, the «saviour» in the novel is Carmolina who, as Jesus, has to «purify» herself of the old world represented by her beloved grandmother in order to accept herself as an ethnic and independent new woman, without forgetting her legacy full of loving stories and tender memories.

One more word about Doria and her sacred kitchen: it is here that she and her beloved granddaughter exchange laughs and stories, the place where of course she is often caught «spooning the tomato sauce over a dish of pasta» (p. 10) but also where she tenderly teaches Carmolina to cook red peppers and to crush the red ones into dust, following a millennial tradition. In short, it is where she educates her granddaughter about love and her ethnic origins through stories and memories of the family's past that, together with her present American culture, will enable her to discover and accept her (ethnic) identity.

Silvia Barocci
Universita degli Studi di Urbino

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Some Reflections on the Relevance of *Mammismo* in the Italian Diaspora in Wellington

In his 1952 essay «Il mammismo», Corrado Alvaro blamed Italian mothers for being unable to rise above animal instinct and for bringing up immature sons lacking in moral fibre and civic sense (Alvaro, 1952, pp. 187, 189). Marina d'Amelia recently contended that Alvaro's essay was part of a reconceptualisation of the maternal figure that took place during the 1950s and the 1960s, when novelists, anthropologists, and psychologists grafted a primitive mother, whose animal instinct protects as well as oppresses and devours the (male) child, onto the spiritual mother of Catholicism (d'Amelia, 2005, pp. 21-29). D'Amelia situates the inception of the exclusive mother-son bond in the Risorgimento and traces its development through the two World Wars and its transformation

into the pernicious stereotype of the Italian mother suggested by Alvaro and arguably still in evidence today.

D'Amelia draws on the correspondence between prominent upper and middle-class exiles and soldiers and their strong, publicly engaged mothers. While her findings may not fully apply to soldiers and mothers from other classes, for whom sources are scarce, loss seems to be key to the mothers' overriding concern for sons, a concern that other scholars had previously demonstrated using other sources and methodologies (Bravo, 1997; Accati, 1998; Giorgio, 2002). Daughters lost through marriage did not equate to sons lost through exile or death at war.

In the context of migration, it should be noted that it was mainly sons that Italian mothers lost through poverty-driven migration. Alvaro clearly had sons in mind, when he criticised society for simultaneously exalting mothers and depriving them of sons sent «sprovveduti e impreparati sulle vie del mondo in cerca di pane, e nei lavori piú duri, o in guerre disperate e temerarie». For men of the *popolo*, imbued with a popular culture which had turned the word *madre* into a magic wand to «spremere le lacrime», the mother represents roots, homeland, religion, and all women (Alvaro, 1952, p. 186).

In light of these reflections, should we expect to find *mammismo* among contemporary Italian diasporic communities? Did post-World War II migrants carry with them a sentimentalized memory of the mother? Did they transmit the Italian cult of the mother to successive generations, aided perhaps by Italian brides who might have already been socialised in the role of selfless mothers devoted to the male child? In what follows, I offer some provisional answers in relation to the Italian community of Island Bay in Wellington, New Zealand.

My sample comprises fifty interviews conducted in Wellington during March-April 2013. Of this group, eight interviewees had arrived in New Zealand between the early 1950s and early 1960s and eleven had one or both parents who had migrated between the late 1940s and mid-1960s. My questionnaire included no questions on the mother, yet useful data emerged from questions on what things they associated with Italy, on gender roles, and whether they believed they had raised their children or had themselves been raised according to an Italian style of parenting. Irrespective of age, migration generation, and area of origin, most interviewees named «family» as one of the things they associated with Italy. First-generation interviewees placed themselves in a generational continuum that went backwards to the family left in Italy and forwards to the family they had generated in New Zealand. One male interviewee in his late seventies stated: «l'Italia sono i genitori, la Nuova Zelanda i figli». None of them attributed more value and authority to one parent over the other. Second and third generations expressed awe for their grandmothers, who embodied Italian traditions connected with food and other life rituals. First-generation

women were admired for braving an unknown world so remote from home, for enduring harsh living conditions, and for their contribution through work and care of family and home. Many hinted at the constraining potential of the family. Among the younger males, there was an understanding that Italian mothers were pushier yet more helpful than mothers of other ethnicities, but that the boundaries were clear. A 23-year-old talked of his protective 52-year old first-generation mother who was helping his sister bring up her child. He predicted that she would try to help with his children, but «whether I let her is another story».

A corollary of the importance of family is that children have tended not to leave the parental home. This practice seems to have gone through different phases and to have entailed considerable negotiation. Parents of all generations deplored the New Zealand custom of children moving out at 16, but acknowledged that, since their children were exposed to the wider society, change was inevitable. One 73-year-old first-generation woman stated that compromise in other areas was necessary in order to stop children moving out. Only one case of a teenager moving out was reported: in his late forties at the time of the interview, he spoke frankly of his desire to get out of the protected Italian family, to think for himself, and to distance himself from a community he saw as stuck in a time warp. He did not mention conflict or refer to his mother as a source of oppression or power. Only one second-generation interviewee in his late fifties referred to conflict, when he observed that the older generations found it «hard […] to discipline children. They only knew one way, violent, because they had nothing else to go by». In his study of the Italians in Wellington, Paul Elenio makes a similar point about women, for whom «learning to manage a family and a household budget, enforcing discipline and order came largely from instinct and the experiences of their own upbringing rather than the advice and direction provided by older people» (Elenio, 2012, pp. 84-85). It is difficult to ascertain whether the silence about conflict was due to a deep-seated taboo (not to speak ill of family) or reflected more balanced mother-son relationships than contemporary ones in Italy. Data on the younger generations indicate that the latter may be the case today.

One interviewee in her seventies mentioned *mammismo* in connection with the potential of the Italian family to oppress, especially sons: «The relationships between mama and son appears much closer in Italy than in New Zealand families… young men of Italian descent in New Zealand have more independence than in Italy». Today living with the parents seems to be a choice. Two third-generation professional siblings in their mid-to-late twenties had a lot to say in favour of living at home. The sister stated: «Our family life is quite Italian. Coming home to your parents' house which my friends think is the worst thing in the world, I like it. I have a friendship with my parents». Once

again, no specific parent was singled out. The material comfort and emotional support offered by enlightened, professional parents should not be underestimated when considering the choice of young people to live at home today, in comparison with the personal and economic circumstances and societal status of first-generation migrants in the 1960s and 1970s which would have been the familial context of the teenager who had moved out.

In conclusion, this initial exploration shows that, while the Italian family structure still informs the values and practices of this Italian community, mother-son relationships do not override other family bonds, as an examination of the upbringing of daughters also indicates (Giorgio, forthcoming). This may be the result of combined factors: the need for first-generation women to contribute to the family income (most women in my sample did paid work), which may have stopped them investing their lives solely in children; the ever-increasing exposure of the younger generations to the influence of the dominant culture; and the possibility that this particular diasporic community was not exposed to the consolidation of the maternal stereotype which, if we espouse d'Amelia's thesis, took place in Italy after they migrated. Finally, the importance of the latter factor grows when we consider the community's enormous distance from the homeland, which until recently would have slowed down significantly communication and the transfer of cultural changes from the peninsula to the New Zealand isles.

Adalgisa Giorgio
University of Bath, UK

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Motherhood and Migration in Post-war Australia

The centrality of motherhood in the experiences, identities and memories of migrants emerges strongly from my research into Italian post-war migration to Australia (see in particular Ricatti, 2014, 2011a, 2011b, 2010). This article aims to briefly address some of the key aspects of the complex relation between migration and motherhood, a relation that is at once corporeal, emotional, and symbolic.

The celebration of the Italian mother, and the expression of intense filial affection and devotion by Italian migrant men for their mothers, are recurring tropes in migrants' public discourse and personal stories. In the popular culture of the receiving countries, the intensity, and even excess, of such love has often been depicted as a constituent characteristic of Italian ethnicity, mirroring (often indulgent) references to the vice of *mammismo* within Italian society itself. Yet a more complex and ambiguous picture emerges from a closer analysis of historical sources like letters, newspapers, (auto)biographies and oral testimonies. While many stories, memories and discourses could be framed within the *mammismo* stereotype, many others complicate the picture, offering contradictory, ambiguous and at times challenging representations of motherhood. As argued by Baldassar and Gabaccia (2011, p. 12), Italian migrant women have «both support[ed] and resist[ed] powerful stereotypes of Italian motherhood». Various contributors to their edited book focus on change and resistance to these stereotypes through generational changes (Millers, 2011; De Tona, 2011), transnational strategies (De Tona, 2011), the adoption of new values in the receiving country, and the opportunities for change determined by migration itself (Rieker, 2011). My research further suggests that such forms of change and resistance are also the women's powerful response to migratory life itself, in all its complexity and intensity, and that the distance from the stereotype often emerges in those memories and stories that maintain a distance from the imperatives and restrictions of public discourse and ethnic community rhetoric. It is certainly true that in both Italy and Australia «the middle-class ideal of the selfless, altruistic mother devoted to domesticity […] exerted a strong influence, defining womanhood as motherhood» (Baldassar and Gabaccia, 2011, p. 13), but it is also true that such ideals were often inapplicable and at times almost absurd in the difficult context of migration. Furthermore, many Italian migrant

women were able to play with the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in such rhetoric, negotiating different outcomes for themselves and their children.

Motherhood, and the maternal body, can be seen as fields of struggle, contestation and negotiation between contrasting ideologies and conflicting interests. It is at the intersection of public and private that we can see many of the emotional and ideological tensions developing around motherhood and around the relationships between mothers and their children. The sources I have studied suggest that many migrant mothers found themselves in the difficult position of having to mediate between the different needs of individuals, families, communities, and even nations. Although some migrant women had similar experiences of motherhood and faced similar emotional, cultural and ideological issues to mothers in Italy, there are also specific characteristics of migrant motherhood. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere (Ricatti 2010), certain common events were experienced with greater intensity within a migratory context, and this is certainly true of motherhood.

Three key concerns emerge from an analysis of the relation between motherhood and migration: 1) migrant women's experiences and memories of motherhood; 2) motherhood, and the maternal body, as fields of ideological confrontation and negotiation in the construction of migrant identities; 3) migration itself as a form of separation from (and abandonment of) the mother. It is difficult to consider these three aspects separately, as they are closely intertwined, but some key characteristics can be summarised here.

1. The experience of motherhood in a migratory context often presents specific and intensely emotional aspects. These include: fears that children might die during the trip; giving birth in hospitals where doctors and nurses speak a different language; linguistic and cultural misunderstandings between migrants and local people and institutions on childcare methods; the generational gap between mothers and children; the absence of support networks or, conversely, the intense scrutiny of the ethnic community; the need to work long hours while taking care of children; the tendency to justify and make sense of migration as a way of providing a better future for children; and mothers' role in preserving the language, culture and values of the country of origin. These are all complex practical issues that have profound consequences for the lives, identities and social relationships that migrant mothers and their relatives develop in the new country as well as transnationally. Furthermore, it is precisely through these deeply emotional aspects of motherhood that the maternal body becomes a site of ideological struggle.

2. This ideological struggle plays out at the intersection of motherhood, ethnic identity, gender identity, and class (or socio-economic status). It is here that the distance between migrants' actual experience of motherhood and its rhetorical and ideological celebration becomes most apparent. In its most ide-

alised form, the Italian mother in postwar Australia carried the religious and patriotic values of the nation; she became the paragon of Catholic feminine virtues; and through the construction of the notion of the perfect housewife, especially from the late 1950s onwards, she also became a symbol of the social mobility achieved through migration. At the same time, these forms of idealised motherhood became a fundamental tool for the promotion of the ethnic community. They demonstrated Italian migrants' respectability, and even moral superiority, over the host society. There is no evidence here of any, even mild, accusations of *mammismo*, as the devotion to the mother is instead seen as an intrinsic and positive characteristic of Italian culture and society.

This sort of idealisation, especially promoted by groups of conservative, Catholic, middle-class migrants, has tended to silence discussion of more difficult and complex, yet also intense, courageous and anti-conformist, experiences of motherhood. Such experiences do however sometimes emerge in migrant women's written and oral narratives, and partially even in those of their husbands and children. They tell of: marriages by proxy, often to men they had never met; pre- and post-natal depression; extra-marital pregnancies; the extremely hard and alienating working conditions that made it impossible for women to achieve the ideal of the Italian mother; separations and divorces; domestic violence; unemployment and extreme poverty; racism and other forms of discrimination; and the influence of capitalism, feminism and libertarian ideologies in redefining ideas about motherhood, and the rights and responsibilities of mothers and of husbands and children.

3. When considering the centrality of motherhood in migrants' lives and stories, a third important aspect is that migration often results in a separation from the mother, and in many instances is experienced as a form of abandonment of the mother by migrant sons or daughters. This is particularly true for younger migrants. Migration to very distant destinations like Australia could mean that migrants never saw their parents again. And the limited means of communication further intensified feelings of loss, nostalgia and guilt. The act of migration can be understood as a form of separation from the mother also in symbolic terms – one might for instance consider the centrality of the motherland and the mother tongue for migrants' identities. My research suggests that many migrants idealised not only their own mothers, but the mother figure itself, for instance through their devotion to the Madonna, symbol of both the perfect mother, and of the *mater dolorosa* who suffers for her son's tragic destiny. Such an idealised view of the mother figure originates in Italian culture and society, and in particular in Catholic and patriotic discourse. Yet it is experienced by migrants with even more intensity precisely because migration itself is often experienced and interpreted as a traumatic separation from the mother.

In conclusion, an idealised mother figure plays an important, often vital, role in migrants' lives, identities, and memories. This idealisation must be understood critically in relation to salient aspects of Italian culture and society, but also as the expression of specific aspects of the migratory experience; in particular: the intensity and distinctiveness of motherhood in migratory contexts; its centrality to migrants' ideological struggles for ethnic, gender and class identity; and the symbolic and emotional consequences of experiencing migration as the abandonment of one's own mother. At the same time, research into Italian migrant mothers' actual experiences, memories and stories, enables a more nuanced understanding of the agency and complex experiences of migrant women, and of their ability to move within and beyond such practical, emotional, moral, ideological and symbolic constraints. It is here, I believe, that the *mammismo* stereotype might be effectively and critically challenged.

Francesco Ricatti
University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia

Note

1 See the classification proposed by Fred Gardaphé. He argues that while grandparents are economic and political immigrants, parents are social immigrants and children are cultural immigrants (Gardaphé, Fred, Italian Signs, American Streets, p. 121).
2 See Giunta (2003) and Bona (1987).
3 Her parents Marco and Sara cannot do this. They are second generation immigrants who are not fully integrated. They are often silenced through the narration and «silencing» is what they have been doing to their ethnic profile: Sarah forgetting her Lithuanian heritage and Marco desperately looking for the key «to everything», the meaning of life.

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